

Imagination and Connectedness: Consumption of Global Forms in a Malian Village

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This paper aims to interpret the way global forms and consumables are appropriated locally in a Malian village. The paper is based on research in a village in the Senegal River Valley, from where a large part of the male population has migrated to France, sustaining rural households with various forms of remittances. Meanwhile, with the increasing barriers to social and geographic mobility of the populations in the global South, many of the young men living in the village find themselves involuntarily immobile, as they aspire to migrate but are unable to do so. In the paper, I argue that consumption can be seen as an attempt by these youngsters to participate in an imagined world of global flows from which they are largely disconnected. The paper will present various examples of this phenomenon, including the display and consumption of brands, food and modern technology which represented a connectedness to the privileged world of global flows. To the villagers, such signs of connections that transcended the rural context were a form of power, because it entailed an access to resources and possibilities that were not available in the limited local setting.

In my analysis, I seek to move beyond the common tendencies – especially in anthropology - to view the local appropriation of global forms in Africa as either a sort of mimicry or, as is the more recent (“politically correct”) tendency, as signalling cultural authenticity and resistance to neo-colonialism and the hegemonic forces of globalisation. As James Ferguson (2006) has pointed out, these analyses uphold a boundary between Africa and the West, either implying that Africans are creating poor, even embarrassing, copies of Western style; or that Africans do not want to be part of an imagined world community. Instead, I want to argue that the villagers’ “longing for goods” in fact signals a longing for membership in an imagined global community, where capital, people, goods and information flow freely and instantly across borders. By surrounding themselves with brands and indulging in modern consumer goods, villagers may feel more part of these global flows, as citizens in ‘the world’, as we currently imagine it, and from which the imagined category ‘Africa’ is largely excluded.